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ARTZ 385.01: The Art of Digital Photography

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- THE ART OF DIGITAL
PHOTOGRAPHY

ARTZ 385

AUTUMN 2013

-

TU/TH 2:10 - 4:00
FA 415 & FA210(lab)

The University
of Montana

instructor:
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office hours
M 1:00 to 2:00
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e: matthew.hamon@umontana.edu *“...the truly radical transformation is not from chemical to digital systems of production,...but rather in the composition of the output, which has shifted from the discrete photograph to the essentially unbounded graphic. It is here that the “revolutionary” shift can be located. The “unique” photograph is now forced to merge, even submerge, into the overall graphic environment. There formerly discrete photographic elements blend even further into the computer’s digital soup...” -Peter Lunenfeld*

“It has always been my belief that the true artist, like the true scientist, is a researcher using materials and techniques to dig into the truth and meaning of the world in which he himself lives; and what he creates, or better perhaps, brings back, are the objective results of his explorations. The measure of his talent -of his genius, if you will -is the richness he finds in such a life’s voyage of discovery and the effectiveness with which he is able to embody it through the image he creates.” -Paul Strand

PREFACE: The purpose of this class is to give you a general introduction to some of the emerging digital imaging tools available to you. My main concern throughout the class is that you consider both the technical and conceptual aspects of what you are doing and try to push them further than you’d think they could go. It is important to think of this new technology simply as a new tool for image making. You should be attempting to fit this technology to your message (balance form and content). . . -sometimes the simplest method is the most advanced. Especially in new media, a rush to demonstrate technical prowess shouldn’t cause you to lose focus in the content of your work. Your thoughts about how to use the computer are far more important than any technical information I can provide you with and they are what you are here to cultivate

This class is set up to start shifting your focus to that type of thinking. The semester will be divided into three sections. Each section has been designed to cover conceptual issues, aesthetic decisions and technical concerns. Discussions and readings throughout will cover ideas and conceptual approaches. Technical concerns will be covered as demonstrations and reading of a number of techniques used for creating, manipulating and outputting images from the computer.

The main program we will be using is Adobe Photoshop. Other programs may be appropriate for individual projects throughout the semester. Ultimately you will understand how these programs work together and be able to seamlessly navigate between the two. Again, remembering that these are only tools used to facilitate your initial concept or vision.

Throughout the course I will be delivering tips for using this software, but I strongly recommend that you study the user manuals, recommended texts and online help. In addition to these there are many other valuable text resources at any local bookstore. Finally, the best way to learn these programs is to use them frequently. Set a task for yourself and then figure out how to make the software complete the task. Frequent use is the best way to learn. As you will soon realize, these programs have amazing depth, and there are always new features to uncover.

Beyond understanding the technical components of digital imaging, a second very important aspect of this class will be examining the conceptual and theoretical implications of using the computer as an imaging device. What is the difference between a digital image and a film based image? How much can an image be manipulated before it loses all indexical qualities to the "real world" (did it have any to begin with)? What are the issues surrounding appropriation of imagery vs. creating your own (if any)? The content of the required readings and our class critiques will often revolve around these issues.

The end of the semester will focus on you bringing together all of the elements we have covered throughout the semester in one way or another. The actual form of these projects will be up to you individually, but we will discuss some of the expectations I have for the projects.

ASSESSMENT: "We live at the level of our language. Whatever we can articulate, we can imagine, develop, and explore." -Ellen Gilchrist

Simply showing up and completing all assignments does not equal an "A". However, if you attend class, participate in the hands-on demonstrations, complete all projects on time, actively participate in critiques and discussions, ask questions, take notes, show care towards the digital lab and the artists working within it, and demonstrate motivation, technical growth and aesthetic development - you will succeed in Digital Photography.

One critical component of an artist's development is the ability to speak and write eloquently and articulately about their work. A second critical component of the creative process is the ability to be self evaluative. To facilitate this development I will ask that with each assignment you turn in a written explanation of your intent, content, aesthetic, and, most importantly, the things you learned. This should also facilitate dynamic critique discussion as you will, to a certain extent, have rehearsed what you have to say about the work. Due to convention, I will ask that you give yourself a numeric grade based on this self-assessment. Your self evaluation should consider 1) Craftsmanship: The quality of the work, including technical comprehension (digital imaging, file and resolution management), compositional effectiveness, sensitivity to materials, and final presentation. And, 2) Content: Including selecting appropriate techniques and materials to support idea, inventiveness, and developing ideas in relation to the assignment prompt.

PARTICIPATION: Just as there is no reason to enroll in this class if you can't be here, there is no reason to be here if you aren't awake and prepared to participate. Come to class on time and prepared to make a contribution to this community of minds. Believe it or not, you have something important to say, and we want to hear you. Your participation allows us the opportunity to engage in a critical dialogue, the sharing of ideas and speculating on the possibilities in each other's work. After all, group engaging in this dialogue is one of the primary benefits that your public education provides for you. Otherwise, we could all simply stay at home and read the book. Participating in class discussions and critiques can include and is not limited to your asking and answering questions, agreeing or disagreeing with opinions, and bringing up topics of interest. If you fail to participate and make contributions to the dialogue your grade will likely suffer.

HOW TO SUCCEED IN THIS CLASS: To pass this class you must complete all assignments and participate in every critique. Tardiness and absence will harshly affect your grade. Attendance is

always mandatory. Again... I am particularly sensitive to missed critiques. The way to earn an "A" in this class is to arrive at class on time with an open mind, participate in the dialogue, complete assignments on time, and make contributions to the learning community.

FINAL GRADES: The primary factor used to determine your grade in this class is **PARTICIPATION**. I will not assign letter grades to your projects during the quarter. You will simply be given credit for turning in the required number of images on time. However, I will give you frequent critical feedback on the work you are doing. Essentially, grading from day to day is based on a credit/no credit system. At the end of the semester, the total number of credits will be divided into your number of earned credits and the resulting percentage will determine your grade based on a standard breakdown.

Specific credit-worthy (one credit or point) items are as follows:

- attending general class meetings (one (1) participation credit)
- attending open lab days (unless described as optional) (one (1) participation credit)
- working on your personal projects during open lab days (one (1) participation credit)
- attending critique days (one (1) participation credit)
- presenting a completed project on critique days (one (1) participation credit)
- turning in a type-written statement and self-evaluation for each assignment (one (1) participation credit)
- making a contribution to dialogue in response to the work of your peers on critique days. (one (1) participation credit)
- attending reading seminars (one (1) participation credit)
- making contributions to the dialogue in reading seminars (one (1) participation credit)
- turning in written responses to assigned readings (one (1) participation credit)

EQUIPMENT: In order to successfully complete this class, you will need a digital camera with at least an 8 megapixel resolution and manual functions for aperture and shutter speed. In lieu of this you can shoot on film and scan your images. With serious and compelling conceptual reasons, students can choose to use one of the ubiquitous cell phone cameras in addition to working with a manual digital camera. Additionally, you will need some sort of external storage device for the transport and archiving of your files. Thumb drives of several gigabytes will work, though a 100+ gigabyte USB or firewire drive would be more useful for managing multiple iterations of your files. Also required,

TEXTS: There is no required text for this course. Most of the information you'll need to manipulate images will be delivered in the form of handouts or will be available online. Our three reading assignments will be made available similarly.

MATERIALS: You should expect to spend upwards of \$100 on paper and output. All supplies are readily available via the Griz bookstore, or by outputting your work at the unmentionable stores (Wal-Mart, and Target).

IMAGES: Where will we start? What images do we start with? Should we create them with the computer (or have the computer create them for us)? Should we appropriate them (from any of countless places)? Should we use some type of a camera to create them ourselves? We will spend

the beginning of the class on this first step of examining image sources (covering everything from drawing in Photoshop, to appropriating images from the web, to scanning your own film and prints, to why we would want to do any one of these techniques over the other).

OUTPUT: Though this is where images eventually end up, it's really something that needs to be considered from the beginning. From a television screen to a building sized mural, digital images wind up in a lot of different places in a lot of different forms. We will discuss different types of outputs and the different types of conceptual interpretations they each represent. You will be expected to experiment with them with some of the images from your first project. Having an understanding of your options will help you decide what form future projects will take.

MANIPULATION: One of the most enticing reasons to use the computer over more traditional imaging techniques is the speed and ease involved in altering images. From simply changing the color balance of an image or touching out dust on a scan, to changing the architecture of a room or converting an image into a line drawing, Photoshop offers many powerful tools to do this. We will cover as many of them as we can in class, but you will be expected to discover some of these tools on your own.

PROPOSED ASSIGNMENTS: Below is a list of assignments that you can expect to encounter this semester. More specific details will be given prior to each assignment. Please take a good look at them now. The developing dialogue is likely to reference and inspire things on the horizon and well into the future. All assignments will build upon each other. You may wish to "re-purpose" materials from earlier assignments to keep a cohesiveness to your projects throughout the semester. Because of this you should work with images and ideas you are highly interested in from the beginning.

ASSIGNMENT ONE, Manipulation: With the computer you have complete control over what an image looks like. This seems great, but it also presents you with a daunting task: what, exactly, will you choose to make an image look like.

With this task in mind produce at least five new images from one image. Start with by making black and white scans of at least three different images you've shot on film, or by shooting three new digital images that can stand on their own as unmanipulated photographs. The images can be from your own archives, new images specifically for the project. Clean up your scans to perfection, color (or tone) correct them, make an inkjet print of each, and then choose an image that you feel you could manipulate to express a number of different moods and ideas.

Using the subtleties and extremes of color casts, invisible and obvious retouching and collage techniques, all the tastefulness and tastelessness of filters, and any other techniques you can think of, create 5 versions of the one image you have chosen. Do not think about these as technical exercises or practice. Each image should be manipulated in a way that it has a distinct meaning, mood, connotation, mojo, whatever you want to call it. Although I encourage you play with the program extensively and nonsensically, I am expecting the same seriousness of aesthetic and conceptual intent that you would use with any project. If you claim, at critique, "I was just trying to learn the program," I will ask you to do another project.

Make one inkjet print for each image. Be prepared to discuss how you feel the different choices

you have made effect the meaning of the image.

ASSIGNMENT TWO, Studio Lighting: The practical knowledge you should take from this is technical skill at shooting objects with studio lights. We are going to have some fun getting there though... For this assignment you are to manufacture a fictional machine or device that is no larger than 6 x 6 inches. Simply scour your junk drawer, take apart that old cell phone, visit the Goodwill, or whatever you have to do to find your materials. From these materials, pretend you are an industrial designer and design your hand-held time machine, email deleter, drunk dial preventer, or whatever it is. Will it be hard edged, soft, organic, dull, shiny, leather...? It's up to you. We will then use these objects to refine studio shooting techniques. Ultimately, you will present some pristine photographs of your invention along with a description of its purpose.

ASSIGNMENT THREE: Scale: As we've begun to examine image resolution, you've most likely begun to see the limits of your camera. For this assignment, you'll choose a subject that will benefit from dramatic scale, and you'll use your flawless compositing skills to stretch the limits of your camera's native resolution. Of course, there are several software packages you can use to assist in this process, though this will likely take some careful retouching in Photoshop. I'll pull out the fantastic GigaPixel rig to demonstrate it. Some of you might like to borrow it for the assignment. Once compiled, you'll output your file as a mural print for critique. The only requirement is that these images measure at least 36 inches on one side.

ASSIGNMENT FOUR, Self Portraits via Dreams, Past Lives, or Fantasies: "Reality is greater than our dreams yet it is within ourselves that we find the clues to reality. Clues are essences and keys are stronger than the doors they open. Life itself is not reality. We are the ones who put life into stones and pebbles. If we did not dream reality would collapse." -Fredrick Sommer

Digital imaging has placed the opportunity to create surreal photographic imagery at every computer user's fingertips. The prevalence of these manipulated images has also created wide spread skepticism on the part of the viewer as they engage these images. Consequently, using the digital tools to create engaging images that transcend the technical components of the medium is becoming more and more challenging. In this assignment we will try are hand at a subject that is typically very surreal, the subject of dreams, past lives, or fantasies. Again, it will be very important to carefully control the degree to which you manipulate your images. Will you choose subtle or extreme manipulation/ How are these two approaches engaged differently by the viewer?

So, the deal here is that you are creating a self portrait in which you present yourself as the person you were in a past life (were you a woman or a man perhaps?), Or you cast yourself in some fantastic space or situation (Ever want to be level three, half-Elf Cleric with level 7 dexterity?), or you can choose to recreate that dream you had the other night in which you were running down Higgins with a gallon of Big Dipper followed by a dozen grizzly bears. Dreamers... Keep a dream journal as a source of inspiration for the creation of images that depict a different reality than the reality in which we normally "live."

Your images can have a simple, subtle twist, or a radical shift in reality using various photographic techniques that have been demonstrated in class, or invent some new ones of your own. Again, consider how light, color, scale, proximity, and other elements of design convey a

mood or ambiance that matches your initial intent. Use these techniques as tools. You do not have to create images that are contained in your dream journal. For more info on dreams visit: www.asdreams.org/

ASSIGNMENT FIVE, Anything: Okay, by this time in the semester, I've hopefully lead you far away from your initial interests and preconceptions. I'm ready to lead you back. The final assignment will be entirely self directed, though we will discuss some parameters of size and quantity of images before you set out to make your masterpiece.

Or maybe... Surface: Along with having complete control over what an image looks like on the computer, you also have complete control over what it looks like when it comes out of the computer. As with the last assignment, this seems great, but it also presents you with a daunting task: how, exactly, will you choose to get your image out of the computer?

With this task in mind pick one material to start exploring. Try color inkjet prints on alternate papers, try black and white laser prints, try larger prints from the service bureau, try traditional photographic prints from film, try 3D images, try prints on icing, (www.computercakes.com) try different prints on icing, (www.icingimages.com) try iron-ons, (www.inkjetmall.com), try cards from moo.com, try.... everything.

Remember that a "print" is an actual object. Try to push this fact. Try prints on canvas and sew them together or stretching the canvas after you make the print. Try prints on newsprint and make paper airplanes out of them. Try prints on board and make sculptures out of them. Maybe your prints become parts of wallpaper...

One final (and very significant) factor to carefully consider is how your chosen output relates to the content of your images. Think about the literal, utilitarian components of your chosen mode of output/presentation, and how those literal components relate, metaphorically, to your images.